"Something happened in Tennessee, something almost unimaginable to the mine owners and politicians of that state. When the companies tried to intimidate their workers by bringing in convict labor to take over their jobs, the workers responded by storming the stockades, freeing the prisoners, and loading them onto freight trains bound for Nashville and Knoxville and places far away...The Tennessee convict war was one of the largest insurrections in American working-class history. And yet, unfolding at exactly the same time as the more publicized labor wars in Homestead, Pennsylvania, and Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, it was largely ignored."

The Stockade Stood Burning:

rebellion and the convict lease in Tennessee's coalfields, 1891-1895

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THE STOCKADE STOOD BURNING:

REBELLION AND THE CONVICT LEASE IN TENNESSEE'S COALFIELDS 1891-1895

BY SWEET TEA

A Note from the Author

I first heard about Tennessee's convict wars when reading David Oshinsky's *Worse Than Slavery*, which is primarily a history of the penitentiary in Parchman, MS. I tried to use his book as a starting point for the text here, but found that in fact there is very little written about the subject. Just one book, *New South Rebellion*, by Karin Shapiro, takes the convict wars as its central topic, though there is an article of interest in the *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* (Fall 1975), and a wealth of difficult-to-find, 19th century primary source material.

Among other things, I spend a lot of my time getting radical history and theory into prisons and training in armed and unarmed self-defense, and have also spent a bit of time in the coalfields organizing against mountaintop removal. A number of distinct elements, of both personal and political interest to me, thus intersect in the convict wars: the rise of an early prison-industrial-complex from the ashes of chattel slavery, white identity and the race treason of thousands of southern white miners, the role of armed struggle in a popular movement, the strengths and limitations of demand-oriented direct action, autonomist practice in the Appalachian coalfields, just to name a few. Entire books deserve to be written just about the loyalties and betrayals of racial identities during this rebellion; the ghost of John Brown must have smiled as smoke rose from the Tennessee prison stockades.

Though I expound little on the subject in this text, the role of largely expendable workers in a transitioning economy was of particular interest to me as well. Both under current economic shrinkage and neoliberalism, and in the post-Civil War South, capitalism finds itself struggling to simultaneously destroy and swallow whole entire populations of newly superfluous workers. Not coincidentally, both periods experienced a massive growth in prison systems and technologies of surveillance and control. As one writer put it, the crisis of this new economic age is "the crisis of the reproduction of the working class, the crisis of a period in which capital no longer needs us as workers." (Anon., 11)

I was also excited to write this because of what I experience as a serious lack in historical inquiry when it comes to the otherwise growing sphere of insurrectionary anarchist publishing. Though a large amount of these 'zines and journal articles deal thoughtfully (and sometimes not so thoughtfully) with social theory and analyses surrounding current events, historical study seems largely absent. Perhaps this is because insurrectionary thought is so specific to our late-capitalist conundrums that to apply it to ancient rebellions is a revisionist waste of time. Or maybe just no one wants to write about the Spanish Revolution anymore. (Understandably so, as Vernon Richard's *Lessons of the Spanish Revolution* is quite

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adequate.) Either way, I thought I would give it a shot. The appeal of history, to me, is that in history one deals not with the purities and absolute logical follow-through of theory (which is valuable) but the complications and compromises of the real world. It is, after all is said and done, this world in which our rebellions live and die.

On a final note, I feel I must apologize for the imbalance in voices in this text. Both prisoners and "free" people participated in the convict wars, and yet this story is overwhelmingly told from the point of view of free miners. Unfortunately, outside of the occasional anecdote or song, it is extremely difficult to discover the voices of convict laborers. The majority of these inmates were illiterate; the samples of their writing that we do have are usually in the form of letters requesting pardons, which tells us little of their strategies for resistance. Additionally, the convict miners who participated in uprisings usually fled the state immediately thereafter, or were recaptured and sent to a prison in Nashville, making it even more difficult to tell their story. Thus, a history of rebellion that deserves to be told through the experiences of all its participants, free and imprisoned, is primarily told from the perspective of free miners, most (but not all) of whom were white.

Scholarship on this subject also tells us little about the women involved in the rebellion. Though stockade raids and prison resistance were conducted by men, undoubtedly women played key roles surrounding the security culture and communication of these actions. Given the patriarchy of Appalachian society at the time, it is no surprise that historians have found little to no writings or speeches by women in coal mining communities. As Tennessee courts sent very few women to prison, and because female prisoners were kept in Nashville rather than leased out to coal companies, incarcerated women probably played little to any role in the rebellion. Were more of these women and convicts' stories available, a different picture might be painted about the rebellion, with different lessons to teach us about expendable labor, gender in the New South, race treason and racial identities, and the rise of the Southern prison. Busy with projects other than writing and publishing, however, I'll have to leave that research to someone else.

UNTIL EVERY CAGE IS EMPTY,
SWEET TEA

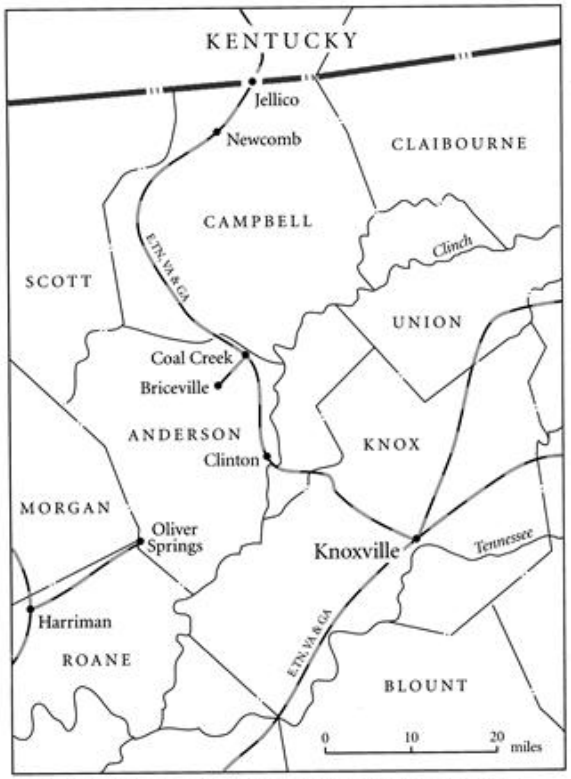
An Introduction

On the night of July 14th, 1891, a band of about one hundred armed coal miners and local citizens in Eastern Tennessee marched on a newly built prison stockade owned by the Tennessee Coal Mining Company. The miners and their allies compelled the guards to release the forty inmates imprisoned there, put them on a train, and sent them to Knoxville. Without firing a shot, the miners disappeared back into the darkness. (NSR, 79-81)

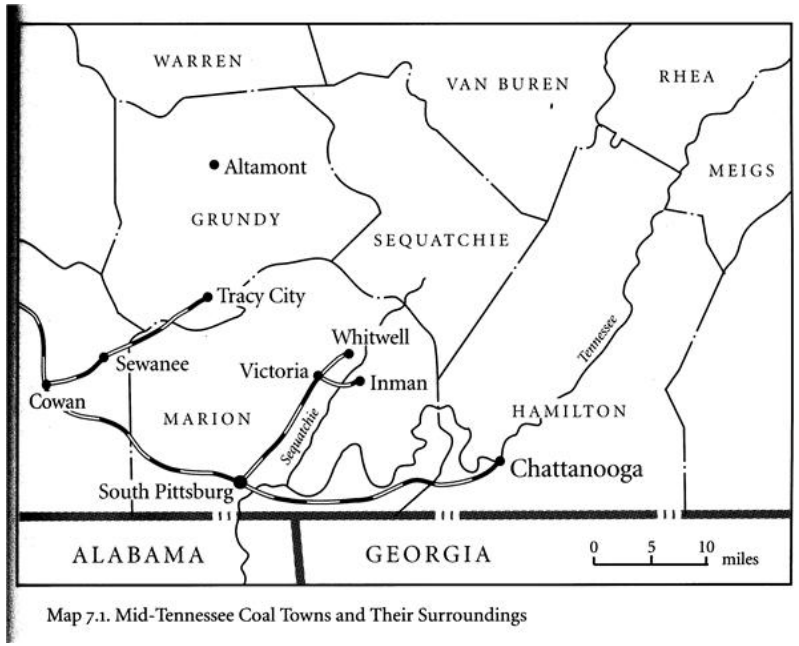
Over the next 13 months, the workers would repeat this tactic constantly, eventually torching company property, looting company stores, and aiding the prisoners' escapes. The miners were in rebellion against the use of convict labor in Tennessee mines, which was being used to cut company costs and disastrously undermine the employment prospects and solidarity of free laborers. In the words of the president of the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company, "We were right in calculating that the free laborers would be loath to enter upon strikes when they saw that the company was amply provided with convict labor." But, as David Oshinsky writes in his book about the development of early Southern prison systems,

> Something happened in Tennessee, something almost unimaginable to the mine owners and politicians of that state. When the companies tried to intimidate their workers by bringing in convict labor to take over their jobs, the workers responded by storming the stockades, freeing the prisoners, and loading them onto freight trains bound for Nashville and Knoxville and places far away.
>
> What began as an isolated protest in the company town of Coal Creek spread quickly across the Cumberlands to engulf most of eastern Tennessee. Thousands of miners took part in these uprisings, and thousands of armed state guardsmen were sent to face them down. The Tennessee convict war was one of the largest insurrections in American working-class history. And yet, unfolding at exactly the same time as the more publicized labor wars in Homestead, Pennsylvania, and Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, it was largely ignored. (Oshinsky, 81-82)

At a time when the post-Civil War South was trying to reinvent its economy, penal institutions, and racial caste system, the actions of the miners and their allies combined with the clandestine resistance of convicts to create a perfect storm. Within a couple of years of the rebellion's beginning, it was clear that the brutal system of convict leasing, by which state and county prisoners were literally sold off to private railroad and coal companies, had become totally unsustainable. Again and again, all across east- and mid-TN, miners released prisoners and burned



Map 4.2. Anderson County Coal Towns and Their Surroundings (*Source*: Adapted from Hutson, "The Coal Miners' Insurrection, 1891–92")



Map 7.1. Mid-Tennessee Coal Towns and Their Surroundings

a practical (if not ideological) opposition to the very presence of the State in eastern Tennessee.

Though faded, one can still read the Parisian writing on the wall, "Demand the impossible." Perhaps the death of social democracy and its welfare state will accomplish this task for us: soon any request or plea made to the government will be just such an impossible demand. For the moment, however, any antidote to the demand-form that might guarantee the purity or immortality of the insurrection remains elusive. We still must attack the stockades by night, leaving nothing but ashes and the clothes of our comrades scattered for miles along the valley.

company property to the ground. The costs of militiamen paid to guard the prisoners, along with the sabotage, work slow-downs, and rebellions of the convicts, made the system cost-prohibitive both to the state and the coal companies. By December 31st, 1895, Tennessee became the first state in the South to abolish the tremendously lucrative convict lease.

The convict wars symbolized the continually violent transition from the Old South to the New South, both in terms of the Southern states' attempts to industrialize after the Civil War, as well as in the violent reactions of a newly industrialized proletariat to such attempts. Miners' participation in this insurrection also catalyzed a change in thinking of many poor whites, who went from idealizing forms of rhetoric traditional to a Republic and commonwealth to the perspectives of class war. As shown by much of the modern homegrown resistance to mountaintop removal mining in the Appalachian coalfields, an uneasy combination of these different modes of thinking still remains to this day, creating the potential for movements that are at once quintessentially American and yet simultaneously radical, violent, and autonomous in nature.

As the convict lease was essentially an attempt to preserve the benefits of enslaved black labor in the "New South," this insurrection can also be seen as an indirect assault by white and black miners upon older notions of white identity and loyalty to the racial caste system. Though this form of race treason never became more than a secondary factor in the miners' economic self-defense, it would be wrong not to consider the meanings of such a self-interested racial solidarity, particularly in a time when the racist prison-industrial complex has now grown to such gargantuan proportions, and neoliberalism has eliminated so many of the industrial manufacturing jobs once occupied by white workers. For those of us interested in kindling future insurrections, there are many things worth considering in the convict wars.

The Rise of Convict Labor

When the Civil War ended, the economic and social fabric of the Old South had been torn at the seams. Huge numbers of slaves had been "freed" with little to no resources at their disposal, only to be surrounded on all sides by a white supremacist society hostile to their very presence. The South's small, battered jails started filling up with former slaves guilty of stealing items worth a few dollars or less. While the Tennessee board of prison directors used racist appeals to argue that these inmates should be put in a yet-to-be-built State Prison, the Tennessee legislature thought otherwise. As Oshinsky writes,

> Railroad fever was sweeping the state, and unskilled labor was in short supply. After little debate and much bribery, the legislators turned over the entire prison system to a professional card gambler named Thomas O'Conner for $150,000 on a five-year lease. By 1871, state convicts were laying track and mining coal from Memphis to Knoxville. Each morning their urine was collected and sold to local tanneries by the barrel. When they died, their unclaimed bodies were purchased by the Medical School at Nashville for the students to practice on. (Oshinsky, 57-58)

The "biopower" of this newly created, expendable social class fueled the rapid development of Southern industrial capitalism. Convict labor was significantly cheaper than the use of free labor, and relied on much of the same white paternalism common in chattel slavery. Convicts could appeal their cases to white benefactors such as well-known lawyers or industrialists, who would in many ways act as their "owners" through a process of appeals for pardon or clemency. If a convict presented him or herself in the correct light, telling white elites what they wanted to hear about their own system, they would often get their pardon. One could argue that the convict lease system was an attempt, both economically and socially, at preserving chattel slavery, in everything but name, throughout the drastic changes of industrialization

Further support for this claim could be found in Arther Colyar, one-time president of the Tennessee Coal, and Iron Company (TCI), as well as newspaper editor and passionate Democratic Party ideologue, who himself put his former slaves to work after the Civil War mining coal in Grundy County. It was he who, as part of the emerging Democratic faction devoted to industrialization, lobbied the State legislature to lease convicts to the state's industrial elite. Thus TCI, which later grew to become the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company (TCIR), eventually became the primary convict lessee.

Up until the coal miners' uprising and the Depression of 1893,

to encourage the growth of new passions, so that when they revolt, the rebels want nothing the State has to offer in the first place. This position understands demands to be a limiting factor, narrowing rather than expanding the focus and social forms of a rebellion.

Paradoxically, the convict wars both challenge and reaffirm these various approaches. On the one hand, the single-issue focus of the convict lease clearly limited the vision and potential of that insurrection, and was probably the main factor in the miners' retreat on August 18th, 1892. While differences certainly existed between some leaders and the rank-and-file, there is little historical evidence to suggest that much of the rank-and-file harbored innate revolutionary ambitions, beyond general disillusionment and frustration with the state government. As one participant declared, the miners were "neither of the school of the commune nor nihilist." The mere absence of mediation and reformist politicking would likely have been insufficient to drive the insurrection in a communist and autonomous direction. (Shapiro, 111)

On the other hand, without the demand of the lease's abolition, it's fairly safe to say there would have been no insurrection at all. As long as the convict lease so drastically limited workers' ability to act collectively on the job, the miners *did* want something the State had to offer. Anarchists in the US sometimes find themselves in a similar situation today, treading water in a sea of lukewarm social movements that operate on a formula of demands and concessions which feels foreign to the content if not the tactical form of our own politics.

Arguing in turn that "our" movements ought make no demands at all is at once common sense and at the same time totally ridiculous. Most of the larger struggles in which we participate exist with or without us, as do their demands. The point is not to avoid all movements or campaigns that use the demand-form, but to figure out how a social movement might become a social force capable of transcending that form. Resisting the imposition of state appeals on our otherwise "pure" (and likely marginalized) social experiments is one way to avoid dealing with such a dilemma. But the question of how to push or pull a larger rebellion beyond the demands it has already made, and thus forever delay the day of its own execution, still remains.

Encouraging people to engage in an action or movement out of disillusionment, rage, or some vague existential angst, rather than concrete demands, will inspire some participants in this direction, but not others. Those lacking the time, energy, or patience for professional "activism" or "conflict-for-its-own-sake" might need something more. Discovering tactical and social forms which offer some kind of immediate material and social benefit to participants, beyond membership in this or that clique of outcast-identities, would go a long way. While it never spread beyond the coalfields, it was this kind of tactical innovation in the convict wars that eventually pushed that insurrection beyond the miners' initial demand to

ville and DC. But the ideas of class war present in this new discourse came too late to drive the insurrection further than it had already gone. Given the likely fact of federal military intervention and the weak labor movements in most surrounding states, it's possible that it couldn't have gone much further anyway.

Anarchist interventions in social movements often take the form of pushing more "militant" tactics, whatever those may be. Bored with the newspaper-pushing and endless speeches of more leftist elements, we fixate instead on "radicalizing" the tactical arena. This belies a certain assumption that a movement using more disruptive or illegal tactics will necessarily become more radical in its desires or vision. But movements like the convict wars of late 19th century Tennessee, along with their modern contemporaries like the French anti-CPE struggle of 2006, clearly demonstrate the problems with this assumption. As one anonymous communiqué from university occupations in California said about the anti-CPE movement,

> Its form was more radical than its content.[1] While the rhetoric of the student leaders focused merely on a return to the status quo, the actions of the youth – the riots, the cars overturned and set on fire, the blockades of roads and railways, and the waves of occupations that shut down high schools and universities – announced the extent of the new generation's disillusionment and rage. Despite all this, however, the movement quickly disintegrated when the CPE law was eventually dropped. (Anon, 17)

One anarchist solution to the problem of these kinds of "leaders" often takes the path of encouraging social forms and tactics that lessen or eliminate the power of figureheads, self-appointed control freaks, and mediators in the movement, thus preventing cooptation. But this too contains a problematic assumption: that if simply left to itself, free of the contamination and self-interests of the politician-in-waiting, a movement will naturally snowball into an insurrection capable of creating rupture with the entire social order. Sometimes this does happen, but quite often it does not.

Contemporary dialogue in insurrectionary circles takes these questions one step further, articulating a firm refusal to present or construct any demands whatsoever to the powers that be. Given the deaths of social democracy and Keynesian economics, this position makes a lot of sense: if the shrinking of the late-capitalist economy makes the granting of concessions impossible, then why try to retrieve the irretrievable? Better

1 Outside of Argentina in December 2001, one could argue that large sections of the anti-globalization movement presented the opposite problem, whereby the content of discussions around anti-capitalism and autonomy internal to the movement progressed much farther than the tactical forms of one-day blockades and street demos used by that struggle.

the profits of TCIR grew tremendously. The company remained the main lessee throughout this time, but sublet convicts to a number of smaller eastern-Tennessee coal companies such as the Coal Creek Mining and Manufacturing Company and the Tennessee Coal Mining Company (TCMC). The legality of this subletting arrangement remained controversial throughout the 1890's, though attempts to abolish the lease by way of the courts never proved successful. Further controversy was generated by southern states' tendency to manipulate local vagrancy or larceny laws when increased laborers were needed. Oshinsky writes,

> Their numbers ebbed and flowed according to the labor needs of the coal companies and the revenue needs of the counties and the state. When times were tight, local police would sweep the streets for vagrants, drunks, and thieves. Hundreds of blacks would be arrested, put on trial, found guilty, sentenced to sixty or ninety days plus court costs, and then delivered to a "hard labor agent," who leased them to the mines. In an average year, 97 percent of Alabama's county convicts had "colored" written next to their names. (Oshinsky, 77)

Despite the occasional pardon, or the appearance of benevolent paternalism, the convict lease was incredibly brutal. In many states the inmate laborers died faster than they could be replaced. The G&A Railroad in South Carolina lost over 50% of its laborers between 1877 and 1879. "A year or two on the Western North Carolina Railroad was akin to a death sentence; convicts regularly were blown to bits in tunnel explosions, buried in mountain landslides, and swept away in springtime floods," writes Oshinsky. When asked about the brutality of the convict lease, one railroad official explained, "Why? Because he is a convict, and if he dies it is a small loss, and we can make him work there, while we cannot get free men to do the same kind of labor for, say, six times as much as the convict costs." On railroads, convicts were forced to sleep in rolling iron cages, which could barely contain the men crammed inside them. "It was like a small piece of hell, an observer noted—the stench, the chains, the sickness, and the heat." (Oshinsky, 59)

Middle-class reformers tried to speak out against the lease through newspapers and political lobbying, but could not be heard above the roar of Southern industrial progress. It was the rebellion of the convicts themselves, and later the efforts of free miners, that ultimately rendered the system unsustainable. As Karin Shapiro writes in her study of the convict wars,

> ...Convicts engaged in escapes, sabotaged the mine, and shirked work. Roughly one in twelve prisoners successfully fled incarceration in one of the mining stockades...

> Sabotage took many innovative forms. Overcharging the holes with powder or engaging in "some pyrotechnic display…directed towards the roof" seemed to be favorite methods of damaging a mine. Inevitably officials would have to close the shaft while guards, miners, and some convicts cleared away the rubble. (Shapiro, 68)

Prisoners also organized large-scale attacks on their confinement. In October 1890, inmates at the Nashville penitentiary set their workshops on fire, destroying many of the penitentiary buildings. In July 1894, 75 Tracy City inmates placed a dynamite bomb in a mining car and pushed it down a side entry. They managed to kill the deputy warden and two guards, and then refused to leave the mine. When a guard killed a convict thought to be a ringleader, the inmates posthumously labeled that man the leader so as to avoid responsibility. (Shapiro, 68)

General work slow-downs and intentionally poor mining probably made the biggest impact on the coal companies' bottom lines. As one prisoner's song said,

> The captain holler hurry
> I'm going to take my time
> Says he's making money
> And trying to make time
> Says he can lose his job
> But I can't lose mine (Shapiro, 69)

In this way, notoriously low-grade coal, full of slate and other rock, came out of convict-mined sites. The inevitable result was damage to the profit margins of most mines that relied on prison labor. For this reason, few coal companies chose to exclusively use convict labor; the vast majority were forced to mix free miners with inmate workers at their worksites. It is difficult to prove, but easy to speculate, that this mixing of company at coal mines is at least partly responsible for the solidarity and communication maintained between convicts and free laborers throughout the duration of the insurrection.

* * * * * *

Lessons from the Coalfields

It would be difficult to overestimate the commitment and determination of the convicts and miners who repeatedly defied the laws of the state of Tennessee between July 1891 and December 1895. Their rebellion brilliantly combined a cunning ability to play on and exacerbate preexisting divisions in Tennessee's ruling class with effective, easily reproducible tactics which provided immediate economic relief to thousands of workers, not to mention liberation for hundreds of prisoners. Their tactic of armed stockade raids, looting company stores, and burning company property combined short-term gains of increasing the workers' striking power with the longer-term strategic value of rendering the convict lease cost-prohibitive. That the stockade raid was reproducible is demonstrated simply by the fact that some version of this tactic was used 10 times in just thirteen months.

Particularly impressive is the determined refusal of the miners and convicts to acquiesce to the niceties of "public opinion." The rebels continued with attack after attack, despite being bombarded with calls for caution from their own leaders as well as fierce condemnation from nearly every newspaper in the state. After their initial flirtation with legislative sessions, they remained resolutely committed to a course of action that accomplished its own ends without regard to editorials or public opinion polls. And, despite the presumed importance of that great abstraction we call "the public," their numbers grew tremendously with every prisoner they freed and every stockade they burned. Ultimately they achieved their goal of the lease's abolition, with a bit of irony that itself teaches a lesson: Much as it was the conservative hawk Richard Nixon who ended the Vietnam War, it was the racist Governor Turney, who as a judge had consistently supported the lease in court, that ended the convict lease in Tennessee.

Despite the incredible commitment and courage of its participants, this rebellion remained largely conservative in its aims. It may be possible to judge this revolt as anti-capitalist in form, but it would be a mistake to characterize it as anarchist or anti-capitalist *in content*. At least until the very end of the rebellion, miners' external and internal dialogue continually reaffirmed the individual rights of land ownership under an agrarian commonwealth, tied the "right" to rebel with homeownership, masculinity, citizenship, and the Declaration of Independence, and articulated their rebellion as centrally driven by the single-issue of the convict lease. In demanding an end to the lease, miners were essentially asking for the "free" competition of labor.

If anything, the insurrection was reformist in character, and driven by pre-industrial conceptions of labor and politics. By '93 and '94, this dialogue had begun to shift, with workers acknowledging the new realities of their industrial peonage and the true role of the political elite in Nash-

considered themselves loyal patriots; they were largely pushed into their insurrection unwillingly, and had rarely if ever articulated a vision of society so radically different as to justify a full military campaign against State and Capital. Their tactics had already outstripped the demands they spoke of: though the struggle for independent checkweighmen and legal tender would continue for decades at some worksites, it was clear that the convict lease would shortly be abolished. Their short-term goal had already been accomplished, and no larger ambitions had taken its place. Though it would be convenient to blame their retreat upon the cautious words and selfish intentions of this or that representative, in fact there is no historical evidence to suggest this happened. Lacking a more radical vision for life, society, and ownership in southern Appalachia, the miners' insurrection probably contained within it the seeds of its own decay.

After the events of August 18th, hundreds of troops swept through the region arresting miners. Only a few hundred of the thousands of participants were ever arrested, as many fled Tennessee entirely. Those arrested refused to show up for court so consistently that their charges were either dropped or reduced to court costs and a fine. Only two men out of the thousands of insurrectionaries were ever given prison time for their involvement. S.D. Moore received one year for conspiracy, and D.B. Monroe—dubbed "anarchist Monroe" by the press—was given 7 years for involuntary manslaughter and interfering with state convicts.

Prisoners and miners alike continued to rebel in whatever ways they could. On April 19th, 1893, almost 100 miners attempted to liberate convicts from the Tracy City stockade, only to have their dynamite rendered useless by heavy rainfall. In July 1894, prisoners from that same stockade managed to get their dynamite to work, consequently killing several guards and destroying company property. Eastern Tennessee miners engaged in a partially successful 11-week strike in late 1893 against a wage reduction, and several walkouts also occurred in 1894 as part of a nationwide strike led by the UMWA.

Unfortunately, the disappearance of hundreds of militant miners fleeing their court cases took its toll on rebellious activity in Tennessee. By the late 1890's, eastern Tennessee was no longer the hotbed of class war it had been. In the absence of this activity, the racism of many white miners rose to the surface, and tensions between those miners who supported the establishment of a southern (and likely segregated) miners' federation and those who did not brought organizing almost to a standstill. Though eastern and middle Tennessee had given birth to one of the most widespread, best organized, and "successful" insurrections in American working-class history, the coalfields remained quiet for the remainder of the 20th century. Over a year after the insurrection had faded, Tennessee became the first state to abolish the convict lease on December 31, 1895.

* * * * * *

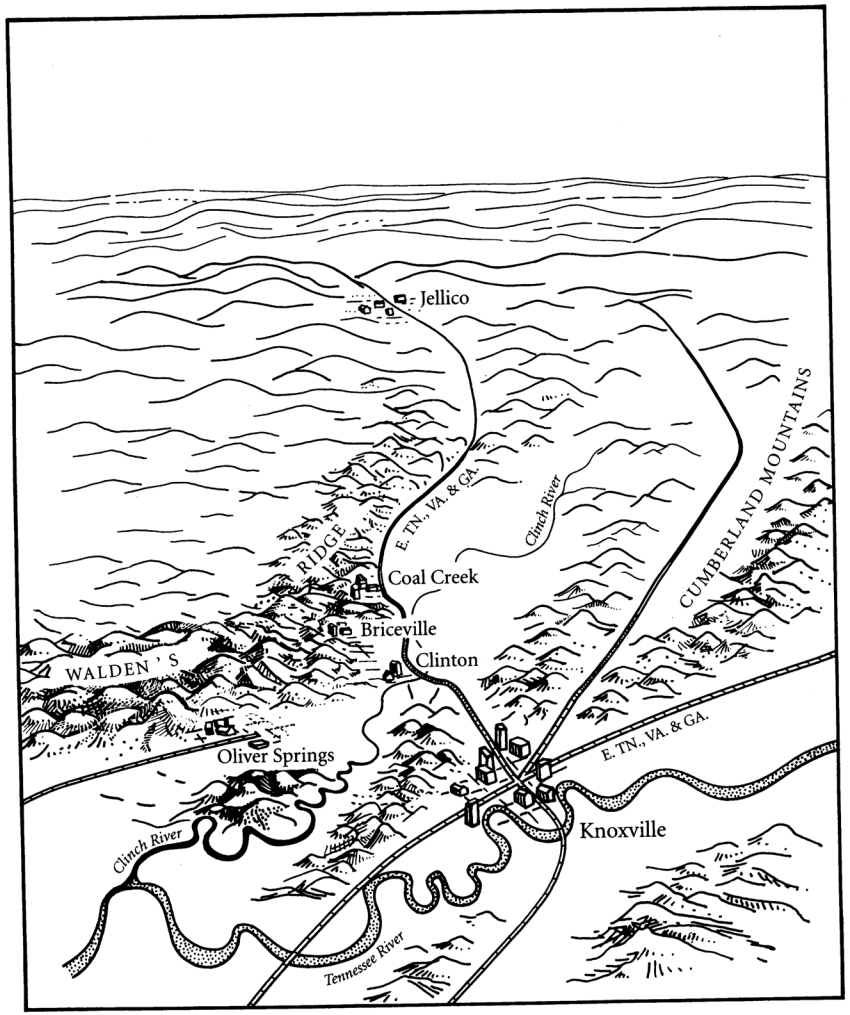
Life as a Free Miner in Tennessee

The rebellion of Tennessee's coal miners took place primarily in eastern Tennessee, though it eventually spread to the small mid-Tennesee towns of Tracy City and Inman, and involved militiamen brought in from all over the state. Significant cultural differences existed between eastern- and middle sections of the state. The most marked difference at the time was east-Tennesee's unionist and Republican background. The small coal towns in the east of state, such as Coal Creek, Briceville, and Oliver Springs, consistently voted overwhelmingly Republican in every election, despite racist poll taxes and other laws meant to exclude Black and Republican voters from the electorate.

While the Republican Party ultimately distanced itself from coal miners' actions, the relatively integrated social life and prominence of several black union leaders, as well as the fact that many of the rebellious coal miners fought on the side of the Union during the Civil War, all were important factors in the miners' ability to conduct large-scale, well organized revolt. This support for the union may also have played a part in the miners' initial refusal to break with state or federal government; thousands of the men had fought and died to preserve the Union only a few years back, so why rebel against it now?

Coal companies operating in the east of the state were generally smaller and more financially precarious than TCIR, the massive company which dominated not just the coal industry but also iron ore and railroads throughout mid-Tennessee. This meant that the companies in Coal Creek and Briceville had far less control over the day to day social lives of residents: they did not own the housing, the general stores, the churches, or the buildings in which social clubs and unions met. Workers and other citizens thus had much more autonomy in these eastern towns compared to their allies in the west. Their union membership and tight organizational structures reflected this. According to the black secretary-treasurer William Riley of UMWA District 19, which consisted primarily of these eastern towns, membership had grown to 1200 by July 1892. Though racism persisted in the union's ranks, the United Mine Workers of America consistently organized both white and black miners, insisting at least in writing on a biracial unionism highly uncommon in the post-Civil War South.

Briceville and Coal Creek boasted a number of secret or semi-secret fraternal and sororal organizations as well, including two Odd Fellows, a Masonic Lodge, a Knights of Pythias, a Sons of Vulcan, and a Ladies Aid society, not to mention a number of brass bands and baseball leagues. There were also multiple Knights of Labor locals, which were affiliated with the United Mine Workers of America. Company managers and bosses often complained about these social groups, citing the fact that they used secret oaths, pledges, and rituals in their meetings, though the companies were unable to eradicate them. Towns in mid-Tennessee had fewer such



Map 2.2. The Coal Creek District

groups, and the groups themselves had significantly less autonomy from the coal companies. It is undeniable that the trust, comraderie, and secrecy created by these many organizations laid the groundwork for the highly organized and secure actions which came about in 1891. (Shapiro, 30-31)

Throughout the 1880's, miners in east and mid-Tennessee organized around a number of issues. Their largest grievances were demands for an independent checkweighman (rather than a company-appointed ones, who under-weighed workers' coal production), payment in legal tender as opposed to scrip, and the abolition of the convict lease. In 1887 and '89, miners in Coal Creek led two unsuccessful strikes around the issues of checkweighmen and wage reductions, and both UMWA and Knights of Labor locals grew throughout the decade.

ing the revolts of the previous year. The rebellion of convicts and free miners was pouring salt on the open wound of tension between Tennessee's State and Capital. Buchanan was furious with TCIR's refusal to pay the nearly $100,000 debt they owed; TCIR was equally frustrated with the ineptitude and incompetence of Buchanan's government in quelling the rebellion, which was in itself largely due to tensions between rivaling factions of Tennessee's governing elite.

Whatever Buchanan's intentions may have been, the rebellion in eastern Tennessee had spread well beyond the containment of mediation and empty promises. On August 18th, upon his visit into town to negotiate with the thousands of angry miners pouring into Coal Creek, the captain in charge of the occupying militia was himself taken hostage. Robbed of their superior, the superintendent and warden agreed to give up the convicts to the miners. When informed of this decision, a Lieutenant Fyffe, who was the acting commander of the fort, threatened to turn his gatling gun on any guards or convicts leaving the fort.

Upon hearing this threat the miners' patient waiting quickly came to an end. Scores of workers began firing upon the fort from positions in the surrounding hills, and then charged the fort. Two militiamen were killed in the attack, and many others wounded, though it is unclear if any miners died. Inexplicably, despite better training and far superior numbers, the miners quickly retreated. Though another company of militiamen was fired upon by miners elsewhere, the main skirmish occurred at the fort.[1] (Shapiro, 187)

It is difficult to understand why the men retreated in the way they did. Over 2,000 armed farmers, merchants, and mineworkers had gathered in Coal Creek, ready to end the convict lease and the occupation of their town. The number of militiamen present, even when counting the military companies on their way as reinforcement, pales in comparison to this social force. In her book, Shapiro argues that,

> East Tennesseans were acutely aware of the recent use of federal army regulars in the Buffalo switchmen's strike and of the overwhelming use of state troops in the showdown between the Carnegie Steel Company and the Homestead steelworkers. The outcome of these conflicts surely contributed to the miners' refusal to engage in pitched battle. (Shapiro, 192)

It may also have been true that the miners simply did not desire an all-out war with the state of Tennessee. Many of these workers still

1 In total, four soldiers were killed. It seems that all four of them died under suspicious circumstances: two were reportedly shot by mistake by their fellow soldiers, the other two killed when their weapons accidentally discharged. Even newspapers that were harshly critical of the miners reported upon the abominable training and conduct of the militia in comparison with the miners, who drew upon both their experiences as Civil War vets as well as upon the past year's skirmishes at prison stockades.

burned the stockades to the ground. The convict guards were totally outnumbered and put up no resistance. Evidently the miners had plotted their action even while appealing peacefully for more work to their bosses. Shapiro writes,

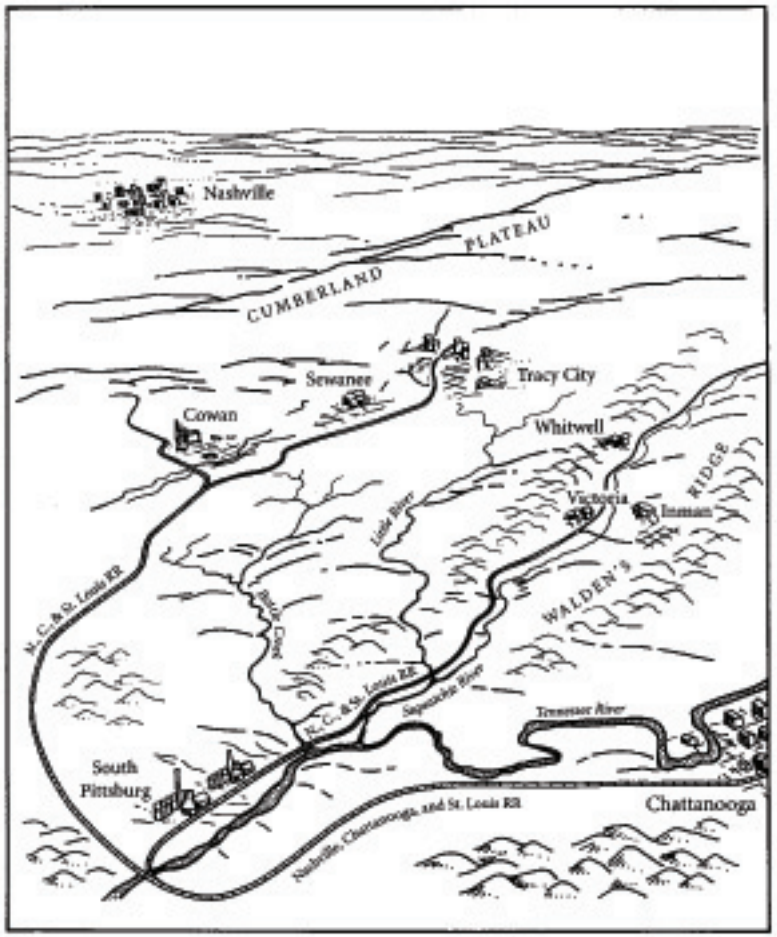
> The preparations involved both attention to timing and military training. For weeks before the assault, the miners met on Sundays in a "holler back of a hill" to consider their options and eventually to set the time when they would "run the convicts off the mountain." In those same weeks, the local sheriff, Captain Alec Saunders, "drilled the men," giving the miners some pointers in military comportment and discipline. (Shapiro, 179-180)

News of the rebellion spread to nearby Marion County, and two days later miners marched on the nearby Inman stockade, disarming guards along the way who were being sent as reinforcements. Sympathetic to the miners' cause, the local sheriff refused to act. The Inman raid emulated earlier attacks, though due to the close proximity of a railroad, the miners chose to dismantle the stockade piece by piece rather than use fire. By the next day, TCIR's coalmines at Tracy City and Whitwell, its coke ovens at Tracy City, Whitwell, and Victoria, its ore mine at Inman, and its blast furnaces at South Pittsburgh were all shut down.

Beyond their economic damage, these attacks symbolized the spread of the coal miner's insurrection westward into middle Tennessee. Despite calls for caution from some union leaders, within two days of the Inman raid a group of 100 to 200 men assaulted the prison house in Oliver Springs. For the first time, the guards refused to release the convicts, and instead a half-hour shootout ensued. The miners chose to retreat with their wounded, but sent word throughout the eastern part of the state. Incredibly, using only the telegraph and word of mouth, they managed to return the next day 1500-strong. Despite two military companies being sent to reinforce Oliver Springs, the workers used their numerical superiority to negotiate the removal of the convicts from the stockade and the disarming of the militia. After burning the stockade, they provided a train for the convicts and their guards, but forced the militiamen to walk all the way home. The miners then marched northwards, determined to end the occupation once and for all in nearby Coal Creek.

Attacking the Occupation, Ending the Insurrection

On August 15th, in the midst of the raids at Tracy City, Inman, and later Oliver Springs, Governor Buchanan privately concluded that he might finally end the convict lease. He threatened TCIR with this action because the company had refused to pay their "rent" for almost 11 months, or reimburse the government for a variety of other expenses incurred dur-



Map 2.3. The Tracy City District (*Source:* Adapted from Wiebel, "Biography of a Business")

The Rebellion Begins

It was not until the focus shifted directly onto the convict lease that the miners began kindling insurrection. On July 5th, 1891, after forcing a lockout over its worker's demands, the Tennessee Coal Mining Company brought in convict laborers to its Briceville mines. After a week and a half of meetings and discussion, miners armed themselves, stormed the stockades, and put the convicts on trains to Knoxville. They were assisted by many small shop-owners and other sympathizers from nearby towns, who realized their livelihood would also be threatened if free miners' income suddenly vanished. Despite the miners' bold attack, they remained strangely committed to dialogue with the state government, directing their grievances to the supposedly sympathetic Governor Buchanan. Their telegram read,

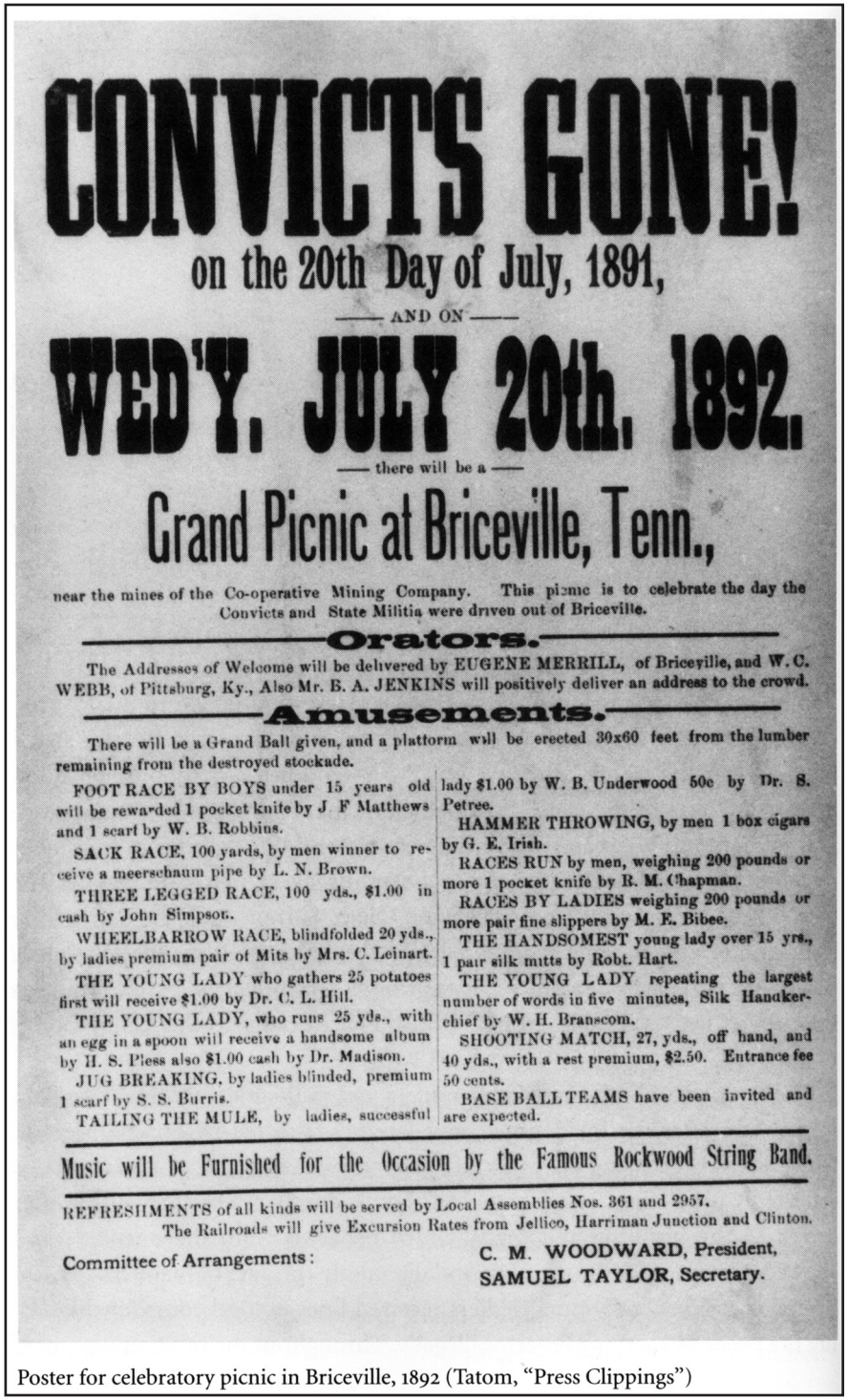
> We the miners, farmers, merchants and property-holders of Briceville and Coal Creek and vicinity assembled to the number of five hundred, who have come together to defend our families from starvation, our property from depreciation, and our people from contamination from the hands of convict labor being introduced in our works...do hereby beg you, as our Chief Executive and Protector, to prevent their introduction and thus avoid bloodshed, which is sure to follow if their taking our livelihood from us is persisted in. (Shapiro, 81)

Their appeals proved to be fruitless; despite his populist credentials as a leading member of the Farmer's Alliance, Buchanan quickly ordered three military companies to accompany the prisoners back to the Briceville stockade and keep them there.

Flouting Buchanan's call for order, the miners and their allies reassembled on the morning of July 20th and again marched on the Briceville stockade. This time there were 2,000 of them, including men from as far away as the Kentucky border. Armed with pistols, rifles, and shotguns, and actively excluding the participation of anyone "under the influence of whiskey," the miners once again removed the prisoners from the stockade and put them on a train for Knoxville. In keeping with a sense of propriety, the miners dispersed for a midday dinner at 1:30, and then reassembled at 2:30 to march on the stockade in nearby Coal Creek. The same actions were carried out there, once again with the aid of their more "rowdy" allies from Kentucky, where similar attacks had occurred in 1886.

It is worthwhile to point out that, up to this point, no shots had been fired, no company property destroyed, and none of the prisoners liberated (in being sent to Knoxville or Nashville, they were generally returned to a State Prison). Nevertheless, these actions cost the company and the state a tremendous amount of money, both in terms of militiamen's pay, lost production in the mines, and the costs of housing and food for convicts sent to the prisons. Union leaders used the threat of these costs to force the State Legislature to conduct a special session to address concerns about the convict lease. Hopeful that this session would solve their problems, the miners naively allowed the return of convicts and militia to their towns on July 24th. It was the miners' representatives, along with a prominent pro-union attorney named J.C.J. Williams, who convinced many of the rank-and-file miners to negotiate. Even as Williams rose to speak at an event on July 23rd, he was interrupted by miners yelling, "Fight it out!" Nevertheless, the president of UMWA's local district supported calls for negotiation and peace, and the rank-and-file followed suit.

The miners' faith in their legislature and governor was misplaced. Despite the opposition to the convict lease expressed by Buchanan and other Farmer's Alliance Democrats, as well as opposition from the



CONVICTS GONE!

on the 20th Day of July, 1891,

— AND ON —

WED'Y. JULY 20th. 1892.

— there will be a —

Grand Picnic at Briceville, Tenn.,

near the mines of the Co-operative Mining Company. This picnic is to celebrate the day the Convicts and State Militia were driven out of Briceville.

Orators.

The Addresses of Welcome will be delivered by EUGENE MERRILL, of Briceville, and W. C. WEBB, of Pittsburg, Ky., Also Mr. B. A. JENKINS will positively deliver an address to the crowd.

Amusements.

There will be a Grand Ball given, and a platform will be erected 30x60 feet from the lumber remaining from the destroyed stockade.

FOOT RACE BY BOYS under 15 years old will be rewarded 1 pocket knife by J. F Matthews and 1 scarf by W. B. Robbins.

SACK RACE, 100 yards, by men winner to receive a meerschaum pipe by L. N. Brown.

THREE LEGGED RACE, 100 yds., $1.00 in cash by John Simpson.

WHEELBARROW RACE, blindfolded 20 yds., by ladies premium pair of Mits by Mrs. C. Leinart.

THE YOUNG LADY who gathers 25 potatoes first will receive $1.00 by Dr. C. L. Hill.

THE YOUNG LADY, who runs 25 yds., with an egg in a spoon will receive a handsome album by H. S. Pless also $1.00 cash by Dr. Madison.

JUG BREAKING, by ladies blinded, premium 1 scarf by S. S. Burris.

TAILING THE MULE, by ladies, successful lady $1.00 by W. B. Underwood 50c by Dr. S. Petree.

HAMMER THROWING, by men 1 box cigars by G. E. Irish.

RACES RUN by men, weighing 200 pounds or more 1 pocket knife by R. M. Chapman.

RACES BY LADIES weighing 200 pounds or more pair fine slippers by M. E. Bibee.

THE HANDSOMEST young lady over 15 yrs., 1 pair silk mitts by Robt. Hart.

THE YOUNG LADY repeating the largest number of words in five minutes, Silk Handkerchief by W. H. Branscom.

SHOOTING MATCH, 27, yds., off hand, and 40 yds., with a rest premium, $2.50. Entrance fee 50 cents.

BASE BALL TEAMS have been invited and are expected.

Music will be Furnished for the Occasion by the Famous Rockwood String Band.

REFRESHMENTS of all kinds will be served by Local Assemblies Nos. 361 and 2957.
The Railroads will give Excursion Rates from Jellico, Harriman Junction and Clinton.

Committee of Arrangements:

C. M. WOODWARD, President,
SAMUEL TAYLOR, Secretary.

Poster for celebratory picnic in Briceville, 1892 (Tatom, "Press Clippings")

them all of the concessions they had previously demanded. Union organization increased drastically as well, demonstrating that at least the miners themselves were able to see through the lies hurled at them by the political press. Nevertheless, the convict lease system still existed on paper, and mines in mid-Tennessee continued to employ prisoners. Inevitably, on New Year's Day, 1892, Governor Buchanan sent an occupying force of 80 militiamen, along with 200 convicts, back to Coal Creek. The troops quickly erected a fort, and "settled in for a long sojourn." (Shapiro, 153)

The Occupation of Coal Creek

The citizens of Briceville and Coal Creek quickly came to detest the small occupying army sent by Governor Buchanan. The drunken and disorderly conduct of the troops, along with their "molesting of citizens on public roads," infuriated locals. That one group of guards, in posing for a photograph, accidentally discharged their weapons and murdered a convict only contributed to this reputation. Their presence also increased tensions between TCIR and the state government, as the continued occupation led to fierce debate and ultimately lawsuits over who should be financially responsible for the militia's presence. The convict lease was becoming ever more expensive and unpopular, and arguments over the roles of public and private heated up, even as such distinctions became increasingly meaningless. Much of eastern Tennesseans' ire became directed at the occupation itself, with "indiscriminate shooting" taking place between miners and soldiers.[1]

Things remained quiet in eastern Tennessee for the first half of 1892, with some miners channeling their energy into a cooperative mining venture, which in fact was largely initiated by the one-time president of TCMC, B.A. Jenkins. It was Jenkins who initially brought convict labor to Coal Creek, and his "cooperative" venture, though supported by many Briceville miners, also came under obvious criticism for that reason. One Knights of Labor member remarked that he could not "find in the prospectus anything at all concerning cooperation, it is simply a stock company, nothing more." Representatives of capital remained totally in control of the enterprise, meaning, in the words of one letter writer, the cooperative basically "amounted to a hill of beans." (Shapiro, 165-166)

While some eastern miners tried their hand at "cooperative" capitalism, workers in the mid-Tennessee town of Tracy City were finally driven to rebel. In the early morning of August 13th, 1892, after a refusal on the part of company officials to provide more work to free miners, the workers marched on the stockades. Between 150 and 300 miners looted supplies from the company, put the convicts on a train to Nashville, and

1 Soldiers were also excluded from town gatherings. One such gathering, a "grand picnic" and dance held to celebrate the one-year anniversary of the attack on the stockade and militia in Briceville, clearly heightened such tensions. The dance floor and stage for the event were intentionally built out of lumber torn from the old stockade.

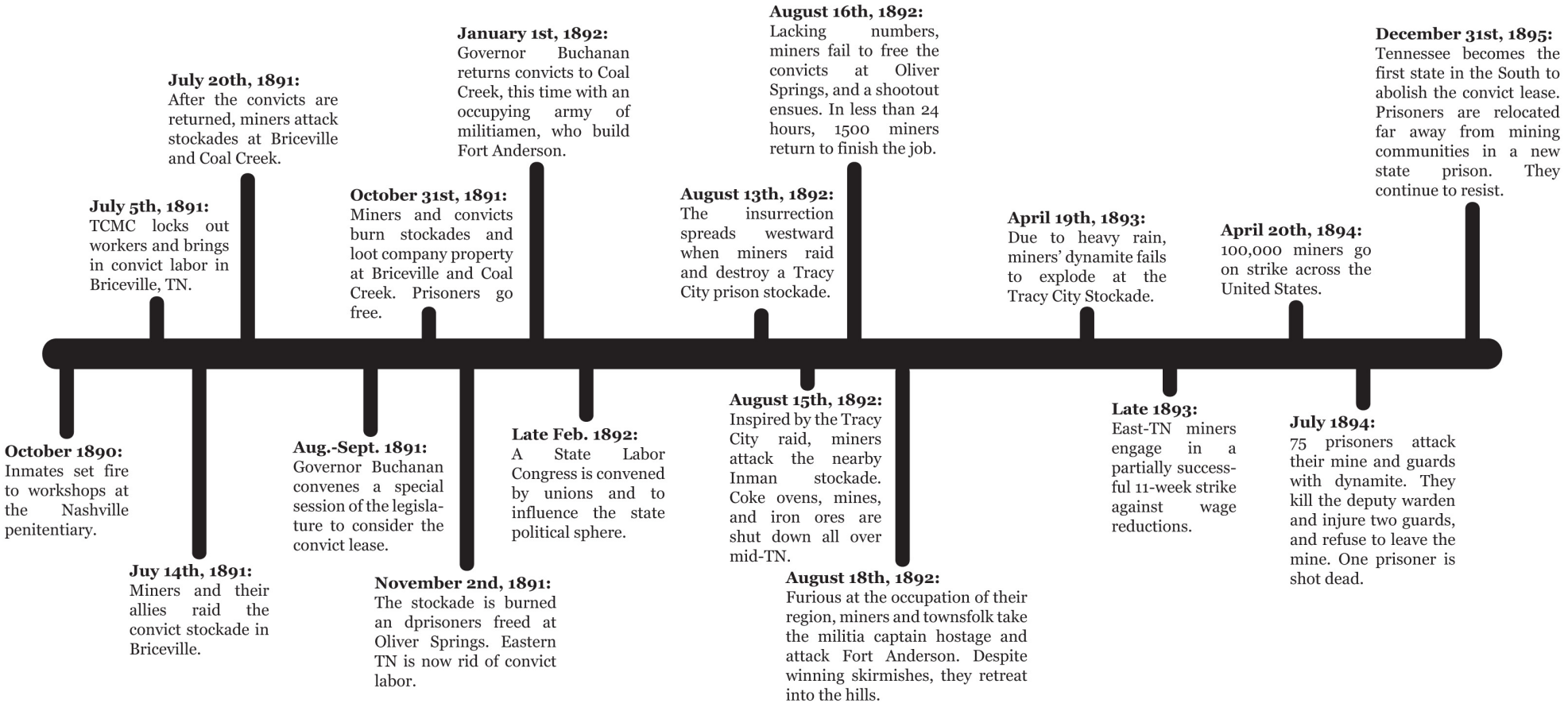
Republican minority, politicians decided the cost of breaking their lease with Tennessee's main coal company was too great. Instead of abolishing the convict lease, the legislature made several decisions to the detriment of the miners' cause. Their special session passed a new bill making interference with state convicts a felony, granted new powers to the Governor to bypass the legislature when mobilizing troops, and appropriated an additional $25,000 of state funds to the state militia. The miners would have been better off never having called for the special legislative session in the first place. Their patient attempts to negotiate only strengthened their enemies and bought the state time to strategize about how to neutralize their rebellion. (Shapiro, 128)

The Coalfields Heat Up

On the night of Haloween, October 31st, 1891, after waiting months for legislative negotiations and various court cases to run their course, 1,000 masked miners held their own "special session." The Tennesseeans and south Kentuckians laid siege to the stockade in Briceville, freed the convicts, and burned the buildings to the ground. This time they helped the convicts go free, providing clothes, food, and transportation for the prisoners. Some of these inmates set out for the Kentucky border while others joined the miners in their march on Coal Creek, where they liberated more prisoners, burned company property, and looted a store owned by a mine superintendent. These actions freed about 300 prisoners. As the Knoxville Tribune wrote, the "miners have acted for themselves and have solved the convict problem with a vengeance." All that remained after the quick uprising was a burned stockade and convict clothes "scattered for miles along the Coal Creek Valley." (Shapiro, 140)

In a brilliant maneuver to avoid incrimination, prominent leaders of the miners' campaign all resigned from their positions three days before the attack, issuing public statements that only peaceful, legislative tactics could abolish the lease. A large public dance was also organized the night of the rebellion to provide an alibi for those most likely to be targeted as ringleaders. One miner cleverly remarked, "Nero fiddled while Rome burned, but Coal Creek danced while Briceville burned." Though the union leader Eugene Merrell claimed the actions were totally spontaneous, this was clearly false: In addition to arranging alibis for visible leaders, mineworkers pre-arranged clothing for hundreds of convicts, cut telegraph wires to prevent outside communication, wore masks and padded clothing to hide their identities, and chose a night when Anderson County's Sherriff was conveniently out of town.

Two days later, excited by their earlier success, miners attacked the stockade at the Oliver Springs mine, also burning the buildings, looting the company store for clothes, and liberating almost 200 prisoners. This attack effectively rid the last east Tennessee mines of convict labor.



Though many of these prisoners were recaptured, it is estimated that at least a third of them escaped completely. Given the abominable death rate of convict laborers, then, it is safe to say that the miners and prisoners' joint actions easily saved hundreds of lives. Forty years after the rebellion, Mollie Scoggins of Coal creek recalled the ease with which the prisoners integrated themselves into the small towns upon their release. "The convicts," she said, "did not do any damage when they were turned loose, though some people were afraid they would, and when one came to my door for food and picked up my little boy I was scared and just trembled. But he petted and talked to him and I thought 'he is probably a married man with small children of his own.'" Even after some prisoners were recaptured, raiding parties of east Tennessee miners would often confront the arresting officers and re-liberate the prisoners, going beyond their own economic self-interests to make sure individuals were not returned to the horrors of convict labor. (Shapiro, 143-145)

The use of arson, looting, and the liberation of hundreds of black prisoners by white miners in the post-Civil War South all created tremendous levels of tension and controversy in the Tennessee press. Some union leaders and miners' sympathizers expressed hesitation and disapproval, while the Democratic Party's newspapers directed fury and outrage against the "rampant lawlessness" of the treasonous miners. This could be interpreted as the beginning of a loss of public support, though merchants and farmers continued to aid the miners.[1] Throughout the course of the insurrection, not one of the thousands of miners, merchants, or farmers implicated in the rebellion testified against another comrade.

More important than public appearances, the actions of October and November 1891 were extremely effective: robbed of their strikebreakers, east Tennessee coal companies were forced to hire back the very same workers who had torched their own property, and then were made to grant

1 Amazingly, in her book Shapiro scolds the miners for alienating "public opinion" even as she cites statistics about the increased appeal of the movement to miners throughout the coalfields. Her evidence in claiming the loss of public support resides only in newspaper articles, which in the late 19th-century were strictly mouthpieces for various factions of the Republican and Democratic Parties. One wonders what "public" she is referring to.